



A Consumer's
Guide to
**Automotive
Repair**
in California



*California Department of Consumer Affairs
Bureau of Automotive Repair*

A Consumer's Guide to Car Repair

Like most Californians, you probably depend on your car just to get through the day. When your vehicle needs service or repair—as it occasionally will, no matter how well you maintain it—you want the work done promptly, efficiently, and at a reasonable cost.

You don't need to be an auto repair expert to properly maintain your vehicle. Simply by following the tips in this booklet, you can keep your car in good condition and ensure a good working relationship with your auto repair shop.

These tips will also help you protect your rights under the law in the event that you have a problem. We recommend the following:

1. Read and understand your owner's manual.
2. Select a shop you believe can provide the service you need.
3. Know your rights as a consumer.
4. Keep this handy guide in the glove compartment and refer to it before taking your car to a repair shop.

Car Maintenance Doesn't Have To Be a Wrenching Experience

Your owner's manual will help you understand the gauges on your dashboard, and will tell you what steps to take if the warning indicators light up. As technology gets more sophisticated, cars are getting smarter at diagnosing mechanical problems. This can help you save money by detecting problems early.

As you drive from day to day, pay attention to anything that's out of the ordinary and deal with it as soon as possible. Almost any problem will only get worse with time.

Don't forget that simple and inexpensive procedures like oil changes and tune-ups really can help your car last longer and prevent more serious and expensive problems. It's never too late to familiarize yourself with the recom-

mended maintenance schedule in your owner's manual and follow it.

If you don't have a copy of your owner's manual, call your local dealership to see if one is available. It's worth the time to get one.

Select a Repair Shop Before You Need It

One of the best ways to select a repair shop is through word-of-mouth recommendation. Ask your friends and associates what repair shops they like and why.

Consumer organizations may be able to advise you regarding the reputation of a particular repair shop. The Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair (DCA/BAR) can, upon written request, provide information regarding a shop's license status, any disciplinary actions against it, and, in many cases, any complaints received. Information is also available on the DCA website at www.dca.ca.gov.

If you can, it's a good idea to test the repair shop with a minor maintenance job, such as a tune-up. If you're happy with the work and service you receive, you've probably found the shop that's right for you.

What Makes a Good Repair Shop?

What to look for when selecting a repair shop:

Facilities

- ▲ Neat, well-organized service floor.
- ▲ Modern equipment.
- ▲ Clearly posted and easily explained policies regarding labor rates, guarantees, and methods of payment.

Personnel

- ▲ Courteous, helpful staff.
- ▲ Service manager who is willing and able to answer your questions.
- ▲ Qualified technicians.

Look for indications such as Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certifications, or advanced training certificates. Other marks of professionalism include membership in the Automotive Service Council, Better Business Bureau, or AAA-approved auto repair status.

Shop Specialty

Some shops specialize. Ask if the technicians regularly work on your make and model of car or truck, and make sure they are comfortable doing the type of repair you need—especially if you need major work.

Explain the Problem Clearly

Remember that you know your automobile better than anyone. You probably drive it every day, so you know how it feels when everything's running right. When something's wrong, try to pinpoint for yourself exactly what the symptoms are before taking the vehicle in for service. If it helps to remember, make a list.

What To Look For

▲ *Unusual sounds, odors, leaks or smoke.*

Where in the vehicle do they come from? When do they happen—when the engine is running? When the engine is cold? When you're accelerating? Braking? Turning? Going above a certain speed?

▲ *Problems in handling or braking.*

Do you feel vibrations in the steering column or the brake pedal? Does the steering pull to the right or the left? Is your tire tread wearing unevenly?

▲ *Changes in your vehicle's performance.*

Has your engine performance noticeably decreased? Is your fuel economy getting worse? Do you constantly have to add water or oil? Are belts or hoses wearing out faster than they should?



Ask Questions

When you're explaining the problem to the technician or service representative, be as detailed as possible. **Don't rush or be intimidated.** If you think it will help, bring along a list of the things you've noticed about your vehicle.

Although the technician or service representative probably can't diagnose your problem on the spot, feel free to ask questions. If you don't understand the answers, ask for clarification.

Make sure the repair shop has a number where you can be reached. If they are going to call you later with a diagnosis, find out approximately when to expect a call. If you're going to initiate the call, make sure you have their phone number and ask roughly what time you should call.



Know Before You Sign

The auto repair shop must provide a written estimate before any work is performed. Find out ahead of time if you will be charged for an estimate. After you receive the estimate, feel free to go to another shop for a second opinion.

If the technician thinks he knows how much the repair will cost, he will ask you to authorize the work ahead of time, up to a specified dollar amount (like \$150) on the work order. When you sign the work order, you are authorizing the shop to repair the problem, and you will be required to pay the cost of repairs up to the specified amount. Make sure you understand what kind of work they expect to perform.



Know Your Rights

All auto repair shops in California must be registered with the Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair, and every repair shop must post the following sign to inform customers of their rights:



**THIS ESTABLISHMENT IS REGISTERED WITH THE
STATE DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS**

**IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE AUTOMOTIVE REPAIR ACT OF
1971, A CUSTOMER IS ENTITLED TO ...**

1. A WRITTEN ESTIMATE FOR REPAIR WORK.
2. A DETAILED INVOICE OF WORK DONE AND PARTS SUPPLIED.
3. RETURN OF REPLACED PARTS, IF REQUESTED AT THE TIME A WORK ORDER IS PLACED.
4. QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE ABOVE SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO THE MANAGER OF THIS REPAIR FACILITY.
5. UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS REGARDING SERVICE WORK MAY BE SUBMITTED TO:

**BUREAU OF AUTOMOTIVE REPAIR
TOLL-FREE TELEPHONE: 800-952-5210
MONDAY THRU FRIDAY**

If you don't see the sign, ask to see it.

The Written Estimate or Work Order

When you are given a written estimate, it must include the total estimated price for parts and labor for a specified repair or service. The estimate does not include sales tax.

In addition to the total amount, the estimate may itemize the parts to be used and the method of repair. If so, the repair shop must stick to it. They may not legally substitute parts or change the repair method without your consent.

The dealer or service representative may also make an informal estimate and prepare a work order, showing an estimated price for diagnosis alone, or for diagnosis and repair. When you sign a work order, you are liable to pay up to the specified amount for the diagnostic or repair services. **Do not sign a blank work order.**

After the inspection or diagnosis is complete, the shop may call you to describe the work that should be done, to tell you the estimated cost of the work and parts, and to get your verbal authorization to proceed.

If any part of the work is going to be performed at a different shop, it must be noted on the written estimate or work order. For instance,

auto body shops sometimes have auto glass shops replace damaged windshields. The shop you authorize to repair your car or truck may not sublet the work without your consent, unless you cannot reasonably be notified.

Giving Your Authorization

No work will be done until you receive an estimate and authorize the repairs by signing a written estimate or work order.

If the technician later determines that the work will cost more than estimated, the additional work may not be done without your consent. Someone from the shop must contact you, describe the additional work and associated costs, and get your permission to proceed.

If you give verbal authorization over the telephone, for instance, by saying “Okay, go ahead,” the shop may proceed with the work, but they must make a notation as follows:

- ▲ On the estimate, the shop must indicate that verbal authorization was given, noting the date and time and the name and telephone number of the person who gave the authorization.
- ▲ On the invoice, the shop must make the same notation, or, upon completion of repairs, ask you to sign or initial the following statement, “I acknowledge notice and oral approval of an increase in the original estimated price.”

The Teardown Estimate

For some complex automotive problems, like a transmission failure, the repair shop may have to take your car or truck apart in order to give you an accurate estimate. This is called a “teardown.”

A teardown estimate must note the following:

- ▲ The price of the teardown, including the price of reassembling the car or truck, and the price of replacing gaskets, seals, and other parts destroyed in the teardown process.

- ▲ The maximum time it will take the shop to reassemble the car or truck.

After the teardown, the repair shop must write a second estimate which shows:

- ▲ The estimated price for parts and labor for the recommended repair.
- ▲ The parts required for the recommended repair.

The shop will then contact you for permission to do the repairs. If you decide not to proceed with the work, they must reassemble the car at no further cost and within the maximum time stated on the teardown estimate.

The Invoice

When the repair job is finished, you will receive an invoice, which must show the repair shop name, address, and registration number.

All work performed, including any work done under warranty at no charge, must be listed on the invoice. Labor and parts must be itemized separately, and each part must be clearly identified. It must be noted if any used, reconditioned, or rebuilt parts were used. Sales tax is included as a separate item.

Replaced Parts

At the time you sign the work order, you may request that the repair shop return to you any parts that are replaced. The shop is required by law to return the parts to you only if you request them before the work is done.

If the shop installs a rebuilt part, the old part is usually returned to the supplier as partial payment for the rebuilt part. This payment is called a core charge. If you want the old part back, you may have to pay the core charge.

If any replaced parts must be returned to the supplier under a warranty arrangement, those parts will not be returned to you. But you have a right to see them if a charge is being made for replacement.

Guarantees

A repair shop is not required by law to guarantee its repair work, but many shops do guarantee some of their repairs. If work is guaranteed, it must be in writing. A written guarantee should show the following:

- ▲ The name and address of the repair shop or company that is making the guarantee.
- ▲ What the repair shop or company agrees to do (e.g., repair or replace the failed part, or refund your money).
- ▲ What you must do to have the guarantee honored (e.g., return the car to the place of service, or pay a service charge).
- ▲ The effective time period of the guarantee (e.g., 90 days from the date of repair).
- ▲ The items that are covered or excluded.
- ▲ Whether the guarantee is prorated (adjusted for time or mileage), and whether it is transferable to the new owner if you sell your vehicle.

Dropping Off Your Car When the Shop Is Closed

If you need to drop off your car when the shop is closed—very early in the morning, for instance—try to call the day before so the service manager knows the car is coming, and make arrangements to leave the keys in a safe place. Leave a note with your telephone number, describing the repair or service you need. The repair shop must contact you with an estimate and get your permission before doing any work.

If You Have a Problem

If you are dissatisfied with the repair work, speak directly with the service manager. Keep these tips in mind:

- ▲ Know your rights, as defined by the Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair (DCA/BAR) (see page 6).

- ▲ Be courteous and calm.
- ▲ Explain the problem accurately, and tell the manager what you think would be a fair settlement.
- ▲ If you are willing to negotiate, say so. In many disputes, neither party is 100% right.
- ▲ If the problem cannot be resolved to your satisfaction, tell the manager you intend to file a complaint with DCA /BAR.

How to File a Complaint About an Auto Repair Shop

In 1971, the Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair (DCA/BAR), a California state agency, was established to prevent abuses in the auto repair industry. DCA/BAR gives consumers a formal way to take action against negligent repair shops.

If you have a complaint, it is often easier and quicker to resolve the matter directly with the repair shop. If you cannot solve the problem, you may want to file a formal complaint with DCA/BAR. Here is how to file a complaint:

- ▲ Contact the toll-free number, 1-800-952-5210, to obtain a complaint form. Complete the form and return it to DCA/BAR. Save all your receipts; they may be helpful when DCA/BAR reviews your complaint.
- ▲ When they receive your form, DCA/BAR will assign a case number to your complaint. Within 10 days you will receive a postcard acknowledging receipt of your complaint and identifying the DCA/BAR representative assigned to your case.
- ▲ A supervisor will review the complaint to see if it appears the shop has violated the Auto Repair Act or any other laws.
- ▲ Your assigned DCA/BAR representative will review the complaint and contact you.

Your DCA/BAR representative will attempt to mediate on your behalf with the repair shop. While DCA/BAR cannot represent you in court, collect money, or levy fines on your behalf, your DCA/BAR representative will contact the owner or

manager of the repair shop, describe your complaint, and attempt to facilitate a satisfactory settlement.

- ▲ The mediation effort may require your DCA/BAR representative to contact you and the repair shop several times. Both sides will be kept informed about the case by mail.
- ▲ If it appears that any Auto Repair Act violations have occurred, your DCA/BAR representative will try to obtain documentation, and DCA/BAR may then issue a Notice of Violation to the repair shop.
- ▲ A final mediated resolution will be confirmed with both sides and you will be notified, by phone, in person, or by mail when the case is closed.

Each year, DCA/BAR negotiates more than \$5 million in rework, refunds, and adjustments on behalf of consumers. If you feel you have a complaint requiring investigation, call us. We'll help you check it out!

For More Information

Call toll-free 1-800-952-5210, or check out our website at www.dca.ca.gov for more information.

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